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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the current status of anthropological contributions to research on child development. The data are provided by the Interagency Research Information System (IRIS), which contains computerized information about most of the research projects on children and adolescents funded by the federal government. Key elements of the anthropological perspective are described, including: (1) the comparative perspective; (2) the holistic perspective; (3) the relativist perspective and the emic/etic distinction and (4) the case study or ethnographic perspective. General areas of research were selected from the IRIS classification scheme, in which anthropological perspectives are most likely to be found. The total number of projects and amount of funding in each of the selected areas are presented. Data are presented for different target groups (e.g., Native Americans), designs/measures (e.g., observational), locations of data collection (e.g., home), and research foci (e.g., ethnic/racial factors). Several key areas were selected for examination of individual abstracts, in order to determine actual levels of use of anthropological perspectives. The authors made judgments concerning the presence of anthropological approaches in all of the projects indentified by IRIS as: (1) ecological; (2) using observational methods; (3) focusing on ethnic/racial culture; or (4) cross-cultural research. The results of this examination show generally low levels of anthropological contributions. (Author/RH)

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An Assessment of the Use of Anthropological Perspectives in Ongoing Research on Children and Adolescents

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An Assessment of the Use of Anthropological Perspectives in Ongoing Research on Children and Adolescents

Recent shifts have occurred in the field of child development away from a long-standing emphasis on narrowly defined aspects of development, deliberately studied out of the context of everyday situations, toward a more ecological orientation to research on children. In tandem with these shifts, which perhaps have been more evident thus far in roundtable discussions at conferences than in actual research endeavors, interest has increased in longitudinal research, large-scale multivariable studies, and interdisciplinary and collaborative research. As child development researchers turn their attention increasingly to the family, community, and culture (and their complex interrelationships), one might expect that the perspectives, methods, and approaches of anthropology would become more appropriate components of their research strategies, and, in a field long dominated by psychologists, pediatricians, and educators, that the anthropologist would become a more likely candidate for the multidisciplinary team. The purpose of this paper is to assess the current status of anthropological contributions to research on child development.

Ongoing, federally funded research on children and adolescents is examined. The data are provided by the Interagency Research Information System (IRIS), which is a computerized information system established in 1971. IRIS contains information about most of the research projects on children and adolescents currently funded by the Federal government. At the close of each fiscal year, a team of research assistants collects information directly from agency files about the individual research projects funded or active during that year. The team prepares a 1 - 2 page abstract of each project, and classifies and codes

salient aspects of the approach, procedure, target group, and content area of the project, using a system of more than 600 descriptors. IRIS currently contains information about 4,999 projects active in FY '77, accounting for $474 million in funds from agencies in ACTION, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, and the National Science Foundation. An examination of these funded proposals provides a good preview of the general scope of the child development literature (published and unpublished) several years hence.

The anthropological perspective can be seen as the intersection of four themes which recur throughout the body of anthropological work (Hunter and Whitten, 1975 ANTHROPOLOGY). While not all anthropologists work in terms of all of these themes, they have been trained to appreciate the importance of all of them:

(1) The comparative perspective refers to the anthropologist's concern with the study of man in all times and all places (i.e., cross-culturally and historically).

(2) The holistic perspective suggests that anthropologists emphasize the impact of culture and assume that cultural responses to the physical and social environment are for the most part "adaptive" (in the sense of enhancing that group's chances for survival). Yet anthropologists also consider a wide range of causal factors when attempting to understand human behavior -- e.g., the biological, social, physical, economic, political, etc. In other words, anthropologists try to be sensitive to the complex bases of human behavior. This sets anthropology apart from psychology, which not only minimizes the importance of comparative data for the most part, but also focuses primarily on the individual, and from sociology, which typically focuses on the social level and on what are seen as non-adaptive, inadequate, or deviant behaviors

or "problems."

(3) The relativist perspective stems from the concept of cultural relativity. A basic anthropological assumption is that every cultural system must be studied in and of itself and cannot be evaluated as better or worse than another. Related to this is the emic/etic distinction. Anthropologists have been confronted with the difficulty of translating the cultural world of their informants into the idiom of Western science and epistemology. Similar to the way in which linguists distinguish between phonetics and phonemics, anthropologists use an etic perspective (those categories used by Western social scientists in order to "explain" social phenomena) but also search out the emic explanation (the set of categories through which their informants perceive the world).

(4) The case study or ethnographic perspective is the fourth theme. Most anthropologists use participant observation as their primary technique. This involves the direct observation of everyday activities, along with intensive, open-ended interviewing (i.e. fieldwork). Although anthropologists appreciate the power of statistical analysis, their primary orientation has not been toward the production of large volumes of standardized data. Rather, the ultimate goal is to come to an appreciation of the informant's way of life by immersing oneself in it and participating in many of its day-to-day aspects --while at the same time attempting to objectively observe, describe, and analyze social behavior and culture.

In trying to identify the presence of these perspectives in ongoing research on children, we encountered a number of problems: (1) each of the perspectives is nebulous, and may be present in varying degrees; (2) none of the perspectives is identified per se in the IRIS classification scheme;

(3) proposals frequently do not provide complete information about all methods and approaches which will be used in the research and only the abstracts of these proposals are available in IRIS, and (4) there are almost 5,000 projects encoded in IRIS, precluding an examination of each individual abstract. Furthermore, over time, the various social and physical sciences--and especially biology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology--have borrowed concepts and methods from each other with the result that the distinctions between them have blurred. Thus, while there are certainly psychological and anthropological perspectives and paradigms which are distinctively different, where the disciplines overlap distinctions are not as easy to discern.

Since most of the key elements of the anthropological perspective are not identified in the IRIS classification scheme, general areas of research were selected from the IRIS system within which anthropological perspectives were most likely to be found, in our judgment. Tables 1 through 8 present the number of projects and amount of funding in each of these selected areas and, for the purposes of comparison, in some general areas in which anthropological perspectives would not be as likely to be found.

First, Table 1 indicates the number of projects which include within their samples specific ethnic/racial groups, which is of interest given the anthropological emphasis on cultural factors. Note that in most of these tables, categories are not mutually exclusive and therefore percentages can sum to more than 100%. For instance, one study could include several ethnic groups within its sample and thus be counted in more than one row of the table. It can be seen in Table 1 that 17% of all projects include Hispanic Americans within the sample, 12% include blacks, 12% include whites and 10% Native Americans. Note that 59% of the projects contained no information about the ethnicity of the sample.

(Presumably many if not most of these other projects included primarily white children and youth in their samples). Thus, in more than half the federally-funded projects, ethnicity is not identified as an important factor, at least not in the research proposal.

Table 2 shows that only a small amount of research focuses on locations which might be considered "naturals" for the child-development-researcher-turned-anthropologist: Indian reservations, countries other than the United States, and migrant worker camps.

Table 3 indicates that the basic experimental pretest-postest design is used in about half of the projects. Longitudinal designs are included in 496 projects, or 10% of all projects. Three percent of the projects are multidisciplinary, two percent involve case studies, and 64 studies (1%) are classified as cross-cultural.

Another dimension of interest is the location of the data collection. Anthropological approaches are more likely to be employed in studies which gather data outside of the laboratory or classroom, although this is not to say that an anthropological study could not involve data collection within those settings. As Table 5 shows, in almost half of all federally-funded projects, data were collected in the classroom, and in 10% of the studies, the lab was the research setting. In 9% of the studies, the location of research was a medical facility, and in 7% the location of research was the home. Small proportions of the research were conducted in community centers, day care facilities, places of employment, and residential institutions. Note, however, that in a third of the projects, the research setting could not be determined from the proposal abstract.

Table 6 presents a breakdown of the FY'77 federal projects on children

and youth by substantive research focus. Slightly more than three-fourths of the projects focus on intervention programs and services (and most of these on education programs), and two-thirds of the projects focus on physical, cognitive, or socio-emotional development. The research areas which are more likely to be addressed through anthropological perspectives--the family and the broader social and physical environment--receive substantially less attention. Twenty-three percent of the projects focus on the broader social and physical environment and 17% focus on the family. Furthermore, it can be seen that ethnic/racial issues are a focus of only 5% of all projects, and that the neighborhood/community, ecological issues, economic or religious factors, and the physical environment are focused on by very small percentages.

Table 6 shows the areas on which projects focus in <u>any way</u>--primarily, secondarily, or even peripherally. Table 7, in contrast, breaks down the projects by primary focus only. It can be seen that in 59% of the projects, the primary focus is on education, and in 20% the primary focus is on the developmental processes. In only 3% of the projects, however, is the broader physical environment the primary focus, and in only 3% is the family the primary focus. In other words, factors relating to the broader social and physical environment are addressed in some way in slightly more than a fifth of the projects, but in most of these projects they are treated as peripheral background factors, rather than the primary variables of interest.

To summarize, most federally-funded child and adolescent research studies are conducted in this country, more than half do not (at least in their proposals) identify the ethnicity of their subjects, almost half employ a pretest-postest design, few are multidisciplinary or cross-cultural, most do not use questionnaires, interviews, or observational techniques, more than half are conducted in the classroom or laboratory, and most focus primarily on educational services

or physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development. At the same time, there are many studies which do not fall into this general mold, and it is to some of these that we now turn.

Up to this point, we have looked at the distribution of research projects and funds across different areas identified by the IRIS classification system. While this has provided us a picture of the use of general approaches and methods, some of which may be more conducive to anthropological perspectives than others, it has not allowed us to assess the actual levels of use of anthropological perspectives within those areas. We selected four areas which we thought would be likely to contain studies with anthropological perspectives. We examined projects identified by IRIS as: (1) ecological; (2) using observational methods; (3) focusing on ethnic/racial culture; or (4) cross-cultural research. Table 9 shows a breakdown of projects and funding in these four areas by location of research. There are a couple of points worth noting here. Looking at the projects which use observational techniques, we can see that almost half of them use these techniques within the classroom setting. In about one fifth of these 596 studies, observations are made in the laboratory, and in a similar proportion observations are made in the home. Note also that in a third of the 241 projects which focus on ethnic/racial culture, the location of research is the classroom.

Printouts of all abstracts of projects in these four areas were obtained from IRIS. The lists of abstracts in two of the areas--observational methods and ethnic/racial--were reduced by eliminating demonstration projects, research support projects (e.g. conferences), and all projects conducted in the laboratory. Thus, we examined 64 cross-cultural projects, 149 ecological projects, 176 ethnic/racial projects, and 348 observational projects, or 737 projects in all.

The two authors examined each of the abstracts independently, judging them (1) anthropological, (2) non-anthropological, or (3) borderline. Judgments were made on the basis of criteria and guidelines derived from the four key themes described earlier.

When one of us judged a project anthropological and the other judged it borderline, we classified it as anthropological. When one of us judged a project non-anthropological and the other borderline, we classified it as non-anthropological. When a project was judged anthropological by one and non-anthropological by the other, or borderline by both, we re-examined it, discussed it, and reclassified it as either anthropological or non-anthropological. We agreed in our judgments in 83% of the 737 projects. In 14% of the projects, one of us judged the project borderline and the other judged it either anthropological or non-anthropological. In only 3% of the projects did one of us judge the project anthropological and the other non-anthropological.

Table 8 presents the results of the assessment. Of the 64 cross-cultural studies, 27 (42%) were judged anthropological; 33 (22%) of the 149 ecological studies were judged anthropological; 53 (30%) of the 176 studies focusing on ethnic/racial culture were judged anthropological; and 46 (13%) of the studies using observational techniques were judged anthropological. Not surprisingly, then, the highest percentages of anthropological perspectives were found within the cross-cultural and ethnic/racial clusters. A smaller, but still substantial, proportion of the ecological studies included anthropological perspectives, while an even smaller proportion of the studies using observational techniques included anthropological perspectives (and presumably this proportion would have been even smaller had laboratory and demonstration projects been examined as well.)

Of all the 737 projects examined, then, 159 (22%) were judged to involve

anthropological perspectives. While this might be considered a substantial proportion of the projects, especially in light of the dearth of anthropologists among the ranks of child development researchers, it must be remembered that these areas were selected because they were among the most likely, in our view, to contain anthropological perspectives. Thus, it can be presumed that the level of use of anthropological approaches throughout the field of child and adolescent research is considerably lower. Nevertheless, we were surprised to find that the levels within the four selected areas were as high as they were. Our assessment suggests, however, that the different key elements of anthropology are not accepted or used equally by child development researchers. As we judged the projects in the context of our four key themes, we found that we could identify the comparative perspective and the holistic perspective more frequently than the relativist perspective and the ethnographic perspective. The focus on different cultures or ethnic/racial groups, and on adaptation to the social and physical environment, appears to be embraced more easily by child development researchers than the subtle emic/etic distinction and the methodology of participant observation and field work. Recall that not many of the observational projects were judged anthropological-- most of the observational techniques did not qualify because they were highly structured and focused on very limited aspects of behavior occurring within short time periods. Researchers seem to be reluctant to use the methods of anthropology, perhaps seeing them as "soft" or unscientific. This reluctance to use anthropological methods, even if only for the purposes of identifying important variables and developing hypotheses, can be found in the funding agencies as well as among researchers.

Finally, an assessment such as this inevitably raises the question of "How much is best?" There is, of course, no answer to this question. Most

of us would not agree on how much of our research should employ anthropological perspectives, just as we would not agree on how much of our research should be "cognitive" vs. "social", or basic vs. applied. Nor do we suggest that more is necessarily better. Remember that we did not try to evaluate the quality of anthropological contributions in these groups of studies; we are reporting here only the quantity of these contributions. We do suggest, however, that a general broadening of the perspectives used in child development would be healthy--and one of the perspectives that makes sense, especially in light of the increasing interest in the child's ecology, is the anthropological, with its focus on the cultural and historical, and its method of naturalistic observation.

FY '77 Federally-funded Research on Children and Adolescents

Total Projects = 4,999 Total Funding = $471.0 Million

Table 1

Race and Ethnic Identity

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Hispanic Americans	856	(17%)	$118.4	(25%)
Black	585	(12%)	$57.2	(12%)
White	585	(12%)	$45.4	(10%)
Native Americans	494	(10%)	$45.0	(10%)
Other Ethnic Groups	224	(5%)	$28.2	(6%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	139	(3%)	$18.4	(4%)
No Information on Ethnicity	2,952	(59%)	$262.2	(55%)

Table 2

Geographic Location

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Indian Reservation	233	(5%)	$19.5	(4%)
International	98	(2%)	$6.2	(1%)
Migrant	28	(1%)	$3.7	(1%)

Table 3

Design of Project

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Pretest-Posttest	2,167	(43%)	$243.5	(51%)
Longitudinal	496	(10%)	$51.1	(11%)
Multidisciplinary	136	(3%)	$17.2	(4%)
Individual Case Study	103	(2%)	$7.1	(2%)
Cross-cultural	64	(1%)	$2.1	(1%)

Table 4

Measures

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Questionnaire	1,053	(21%)	$120.0	(25%)
Interview	891	(18%)	$83.5	(18%)
Observation	596	(12%)	$52.8	(11%)

Table 5

Location of Data Collection

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Classroom	2,097	(42%)	$248.6	(52%)
Laboratory	509	(10%)	$32.8	(7%)
Medical Clinic	460	(9%)	$36.7	(8%)
Home	340	(7%)	$22.6	(5%)
Community Center	158	(3%)	$11.0	(2%)
Group Care Facility	96	(2%)	$12.3	(3%)
Place of Employment	83	(2%)	$20.7	(4%)
Residential Institution	64	(1%)	$9.5	(2%)
Information Not Available	1,701	(34%)	$128.1	(27%)

Table 6

Research Focus

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Intervention Programs/Services	3,843	(77%)	$420.8	(89%)
Educational Services	3,156	(63%)	$347.6	(73%)
Health Services	787	(16%)	$97.3	(21%)
Welfare Services	294	(6%)	$43.6	(9%)
Day Care Services	72	(1%)	$4.5	(1%)
Developmental Processes	3,314	(66%)	$275.9	(58%)
Physical Development	1,129	(23%)	$76.9	(16%)
Cognitive Development	1,936	(39%)	$182.7	(39%)
Socioemotional Development	1,908	(38%)	$162.5	(34%)
Broader Social/Physical Environment	1,157	(23%)	$103.1	(22%)
Socio-Cultural	593	(12%)	$49.3	(10%)
Ethnic/Racial	241	(5%)	$14.9	(3%)
SES	199	(4%)	$11.8	(3%)
Religious	28	(1%)	$2.0	(1%)
Social Problems	329	(7%)	$31.3	(7%)
Laws and Policies Affecting Children and Youth	222	(4%)	$20.8	(4%)
Neighborhood/Community	215	(4%)	$17.4	(4%)
Economic Environment	151	(3%)	$21.3	(4%)
Ecological Studies	149	(3%)	$14.7	(3%)
Mass Media	25	(1%)	$ 1.5	(1%)
Physical Environment	18	(1%)	$.4	(1%)
The Family	865	(17%)	$60.0	(13%)
Research Methods	654	(13%)	$65.4	(14%)

Table 7

Primary Research Focus

Category	Projects		Funding	
	No.	%[a]	Amt.[b]	%[c]
Educational Services	2,938	(59%)	$326.1	(69%)
Developmental Processes	1,019	(20%)	$54.9	(12%)
Physical Development	428	(5%)	$26.6	(6%)
Cognitive Development	326	(7%)	$17.8	(4%)
Socioemotional Development	201	(4%)	$7.1	(1%)
Health Services	314	(6%)	$24.5	(5%)
Research Methods	151	(3%)	$9.5	(2%)
Broader Social/Physical Environment	151	(3%)	$7.2	(2%)
The Family	140	(3%)	$7.0	(1%)
Welfare Services	119	(2%)	$15.1	(3%)
Day Care	35	(1%)	$2.0	(1%)

[a]Percentage of total number of FY '77 projects (4,999).

[b]In millions of dollars.

[c]Percentage of total amount of FY '77 funding ($474,028,345).

Table 8

Number of Projects Judged Anthropological and Non-Anthropological, by Area

Area	Anthropological		Non-Anthropological		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Cross-Cultural	27	(42%)	37	(58%)	64
Ethnic/Racial	53	(30%)	123	(70%)	176
Ecological	33	(22%)	116	(78%)	149
Observational	46	(13%)	302	(87%)	348
Total	159	(22%)	578	(78%)	737

Note. Two judges examined each of the abstracts independently, judging them (1) anthropological, (2) non-anthropological, or (3) borderline. When one judged a project anthropological and the other judged it borderline, it was classified as anthropological. When one judged a project non-anthropological and the other judged it borderline, it was classified as non-anthropological. When a project was judged anthropological by one and non-anthropological by the other, or borderline by both, it was re-examined, discussed, and reclassified as either anthropological or non-anthropological. Initial judgments were in agreement in 83% of the 737 projects. In 14% of the projects one judged the project borderline and the other judged it either anthropological or non-anthropological. In 3% of the projects, one judged the project anthropological and the other judged it non-anthropological.

Table 9

LOCATION OF RESEARCH BY SELECTED VARIABLES

LOCATION	ACTIVE		CROSS CULTURAL RES		OBSERVATION		ECOLOGICAL STUDY		ETHNIC/RACIAL CUL	
	PROJECTS	FUNDING	PROJECTS	FUNDING	PROJECTS	FUNDING	PROJECTS	FUNDING	PROJECTS	FUNDING
ACTIVE.....	4,999	$474,028,345	64	$2,146,863	596	$52,945,852	149	$14,710,734	241	14951961
PERCENT.....	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
LAB.....	539	$39,761,197	9	$536,336	106	$4,653,249	10	$1,070,901	9	$469,549
PERCENT.....	10.2	8.9	14.1	25.0	17.8	8.9	6.7	7.3	3.7	3.2
RESEARCH IN HOME....	340	$22,649,648	10	$252,040	118	$7,215,484	19	$2,585,436	20	1,300075
PERCENT.....	6.8	4.8	15.6	11.7	19.8	13.7	26.9	17.6	8.3	8.8
CLASSROOM.....	2,097	$248,575,897	11	$519,859	257	$34,438,977	35	$2,253,965	80	5,375196
PERCENT.....	41.9	52.4	17.2	24.2	43.1	65.2	23.5	15.3	33.2	36.2
OTHER LOCATION.....	823	$83,367,423	7	$170,172	139	$10,428,768	22	$1,336,461	28	1,282313
PERCENT.....	16.5	17.6	10.9	7.9	23.3	19.7	14.8	9.1	11.6	8.6
PLACE OF RESEARCH NA	1,701	$128,111,215	34	$940,405	109	$5,183,800	73	$10,057,352	124	7,600102
PERCENT.....	34.0	27.0	53.1	43.8	18.3	9.8	48.3	68.4	51.5	51.2